



COAST GUARD HOVERCRAFT UNIT

The Canadian Coast Guard's Vancouver Hovercraft Unit is an important link in a network of Coast Guard, government and private vessels (large and small) that make up the search and rescue organization on the West Coast.

When a call from a vessel or aircraft in distress comes in, all vessels hearing the "mayday" respond. The message is immediately passed through the nearest Coast Guard radio station to the Rescue Co-ordination Centre (RCC) in Victoria. The RCC, which keeps track of all Coast Guard rescue vessels, government ships and volunteer rescue agents, dispatches all available help.

If the distress call is within a 62 km radius of Vancouver International Airport, a hovercraft will be among the units dispatched.

Operating the southern edge of Vancouver International Airport, the hovercraft provide search and rescue coverage at the southern end of the Strait of Georgia including Howe Sound, the Gulf Islands, San Juan Islands, the east coast of Vancouver Island south of Balinas Island, the lower mainland from Pender Island to Cherry Point, Washington, and the Fraser River to New Westminster.

Stricken vessels or aircraft are not the only emergencies requiring the aid of

the hovercraft or other search and rescue equipment. Frequently, the hovercraft or aircraft are required to transport sick and injured people from isolated areas to hospitals in the Victoria or Vancouver areas. The hovercraft also has been used to assist police in the investigation of crimes or to apprehend fugitives where a high speed marine or amphibious vehicle is required.

A NEW DIMENSION

A hovercraft unit was established in August, 1968, to evaluate Air Cushion Vehicles for use in the Canadian Coast Guard. The vehicle used for the test program was the British Hovercraft Corporation's SRN 5 Hovercraft. Coast Guard personnel were given time to familiarize and train themselves in the use of this new machine and concept and by April, 1969, the unit became fully operational.

During the next two years, the craft and crews carried out trials in every aspect of Coast Guard operations along the Pacific Coast. This included servicing and checking the positions of aids to navigation, pollution control (detection, prevention and cleaning up), tow boat inspection, assisting scientific research, hydrographic surveys, and search and rescue.

The hovercraft's tests took it from Juan de Fuca Strait, up the inside passage to Prince Rupert and up the Fraser River to Hell's Gate. During its trials the craft operated day and night in all weather, including winds up to 50 knots and seas of 2.4 m. It could maintain an average speed of 40 knots and, at times, reach a speed of 55 knots.

The hovercraft was successful in all undertakings. The most notable success was its natural evolution into a search and rescue role. With more than 160 square kilometres of tidal flats in the Vancouver area and the craft's rapid response, it soon became indispensable.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

In 1973, the SRN 5 was transferred from general Coast Guard duties and re-assigned to a primary Search and Rescue mission. It continued its other Coast Guard activities as a secondary role. In September, 1977, a larger hovercraft, the SRN 6 joined the unit.

The two hovercraft enable the unit to provide search and rescue coverage 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and to substantially increase its involvement in other Coast Guard roles.

Six, three-man crews, supported by maintenance, stores, and administrative personnel staff the two hovercraft and the unit's base on Sea Island.

The two Vancouver-based hovercraft are the only air cushioned vehicles dedicated to a search and rescue role in the Canadian Coast Guard. The third Coast Guard hovercraft is stationed in Montreal and is used for icebreaking and servicing aids to navigation.

Powered by 1000 h.p. Rolls Royce Marine Gnome gas turbine engines, the hovercraft can remain on patrol for approximately six hours. They are equipped with AM and FM VHF radios, HF single sideband radio, CB radio, and both VHF and HF direction finding equipment.

They also carry such search and rescue equipment as a comprehensive first aid kit, two 60 million candle power search lights, life rafts, towing, fire-fighting equipment and spare fuel for stranded boat operators. In addition the hovercraft has had several structural modifications enabling it to carry out search and rescue operations more effectively.

SPECIFICATIONS

SRN 5		SRN 6
13.5M	Length	14 m
7 m	Width	7.8 m
9000 k	Gross weight	13500 k
6400 k	Light weight	8600 k



For further information contact the Commanding Officer, C.C.G. Hovercraft Unit, Vancouver, 273-2556.

Photos by Roy Luckow